



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## The Vine

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 3, 2015*

*The Fifth Sunday of Easter —Based on John 15: 1-8*

There's a brownstone next to my apartment building. And it has, or should I say had, a wisteria vine growing out of the little patch of earth by its front stairs. The vine had climbed all the way up the front of the building and had spread over half of it. And it would be around this time every year that the grey tangles would twist out shining green leaves and purple bouquets. The building itself seemed to come alive. It would sing to me using the birds that found a home there. And the great vine, more than ever, had started to embrace my own building, beginning with the roof. Which made it lovely up there. But this year, I imagine that the landlord began to worry about what this beautiful vine would be doing to the bricks and mortar of the property. And so, a few months ago, a strategic cut was made. A sizable gap was sawed out of the vine at its thickest point, right at the base, close to the ground. If the gardener had made the same sized cut anywhere else, perhaps the vine could have adapted. Filled the gaps over time, with fresh tendrils. But because the gardener knew how a vine functions and flows, the entire vine will be grey this spring. Bad news for the vine, but good news for the brownstone, with a new lease on life and, I imagine, some new leases on Craigslist.

Although it seems like such a quotidian image, there is a deep wisdom to Jesus' teaching about the vine that human beings (although we are not physically connected, and we may inhabit different spaces, look different, say and do different things) are not, at our core, the discrete forms that we may seem on the surface. Our relationships do bind us to each other. But it is deeper than that. If you thought about it a bit, you would see that our relationships make us who we are, especially our closer ones. And this web of unity is not only tied up with the people with whom we meet, but also with the people we read about in our books and watch on our screens. And strange but true, you don't even need to be alive to participate in this life. This shared life, this human vine extends into the past and will extend into the future. Our shared life constructs who we become. And this unity happens just by virtue of living any life. No matter what, we are all part of some human vine.

Jesus wanted to give us this wisdom. He wanted to make this reality so vivid that anyone could see it, even though it is a largely invisible reality. Then he wanted us to use this wisdom for good. He wanted us to consider our source, to consider the base and the root of who we are. Because of the way we are made up, it matters where our vine is planted. If we are planted by the Gowanus Canal, we might wonder how our fruit is going to turn out. If we are planted by a pool of fresh, holy water, our fruit is likely to taste better.

This isn't proprietary knowledge for people of faith. Others know and use this awareness of our vine-ness. Some for profit. Some for cruelty. Terrorists know all about the wisdom of the vine. It is not only their acts of violence, but where their violence is directed that shows their insight. They exploit the extreme vulnerability of our vine-like qualities by, like that brownstone gardener, getting as close as they can to the base of who we are. Their violence attacks what is treasured and sacred and highly visible, thanks to the media, taking the choice pound of flesh to agonize millions, to puncture whole markets, and to stir up whole nations.

But Jesus wants us to use this wisdom for good. If there is a strategic point to be cruel, there is also a strategic point to love. Right at the base of things. Jesus wants to equip us with this power. Jesus says at the end of his life in John's Gospel: "This is what I am going to do. I am going to plant myself in God so deeply that it is going to be difficult to tell where I end and God begins. And, on top of that, I am going to be rooted in God so deeply that even my death won't break that connection. And the benefits of my rootedness in God can be yours as well. Not only the benefits can be yours, but a kind of unity will be yours, too. It is a big part of John's Gospel. As Jesus is united in God, so can we be united in God.

Where a lot of us get stuck these days is when Jesus says things like "Whoever abides in me bears much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Or even more troubling, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a

branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” This looks like the height of exclusionary and hellfire preaching. It can easily be used as such. But for me—and I really believe this is where Jesus is going with this—he is not saying that only Christians can do anything worthwhile, and anyone who does not believe “X, Y, and Z” about him is going to hell. What Jesus is up to is so much bigger than that. He’s trying to open up a path that is not primarily a creed, not primarily a religious allegiance. He’s trying to get us on board for a Way of life. Instead of saying, “Believe in me,” he says, “Abide in me.” There was another time in John’s gospel when he said, “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” This “abiding” is so much more important than thinking a certain thing. “Abiding in Jesus” does not rely on being Christian or some such. It doesn’t even rely on knowing who Jesus is. It is primarily found in following the Way, doing Christ-like things. Jesus said this so often. And this is what is so refreshing. You are known by your fruits! Not your allegiances! Even the people that say they love God will be known by their actions, not their words. You heard it in the first reading today from the early church of John the disciple: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” The flip side of this is that you don’t even have to be a lover of God to end up loving God through other people. That is the wonder of this particular vine that Jesus has planted. So many other vines are known by their unity in politics or genetics or culture. Jesus’ vine is known by its unity in divine attributes, which is really found in a pattern of life, accessible to people of all politics, all genetics, and all cultures. And to paraphrase John’s gospel, we abide in Jesus when we love one another with the kind of love that Jesus showed us. Not just any kind of romantic or filial love. But a deep love that is willing to lay down one’s life so a friend next to them may live. This may mean that our actual lives may be lost, yes. But this kind of loving connection with others and with God is not just for martyrs. It is for all people who love others no matter the cost to themselves. This love is how you get connected to the vine.

One of the things that cut us off from this particular vine is fear. Fear of loss. Fear of betrayal. Fear of death. If we put that fear first, there is just no way that we can get the fruit that Jesus desires for us to have. “There is no fear in love,” the epistle of John says. “Perfect love casts out fear.” Yes, it does. But here is where I think people get surprised. Perfect love does not cast out pain. We see in Jesus’ life agonies and tears as he continues in his ministry. We also read of Mary’s pierced heart, as a result of her following God’s call. If you seek to be connected to this vine, and your heart is never broken, well, I hate to break it to you, but you are doing it wrong. The vine of Jesus is not one of comfort. But it is a vine of consolation. These are distinct things. If the vine were comfortable, we would never be stressed or hurt. But the vine, instead, consoles us. Consolation gives a kind of relief even when we are still under duress. Someone on the vine of Jesus can’t avoid the stress that that connection brings. Not without anesthetizing ones self! God can’t take away our broken hearts, without excising our hearts from our body. God wants to give us a kind of peace that we can only have if we are connected to our neighbor in a great chain of love. Because the best things in heaven and earth come with being a part of this kind of vine. While still abiding in love. You’d think that giving up our lives to our brothers and sisters would be the worst possible thing. But, no, it is actually the thing that we need the most to do in this life. And if this love isn’t animating us, if this kind of love isn’t animating us, no fruits will come, and our lives aren’t going to thrive. Jesus makes our lives into fruits of the vine by making them a gift. And in that we will find nourishment and peace. An Easter peace that is not even undone by the threat of death and the grave, when most other things falter in the face of such a dreadful chop at the base. But the wonder of this particular vine is that it was chopped at the base by a brutal gardener. He used a cross that time. And yet somehow the vine, every day, still blooms. It still bears fruit. The fruit of joy and peace. A peace that we can have in the most surprising places. The peace we can have while sorting through the rubble of Nepal. This is the peace that we can have while facing up to the flames of Baltimore. This is the peace we can have by sorting through the meaning of our own lives. This is the peace that passes all understanding, and that passes through God, through Jesus, and directly to our hearts. May our hearts be ripe on this day. Ready to love as God loves, so that our joy, and the joy of all Creation, may be complete.

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